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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study sought to identify: (1) parents' representations of children's need for support; (2) the nature and frequency of the support that parents believe they have given their child; and (3) the differences between the representations of parents whose child has behavior problems and those of parents of children without behavior problems. Twenty-seven parents of children ages 6 to 9 (10 children had behavior problems) responded to 2 questionnaires and a semi-structured interview. Findings indicated that parents in both groups reported having given support to their child in similar proportions. However, the parents of children without behavior problems believed, more so than parents of children with behavior problems, that children needed the parents' emotional support during difficult situations with peers or at home. (Contains 43 references.) (EV)

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Parental support for their children with or without behavior problems: an exploratory study

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Abstract

The familial and extra-familial support is amply documented by the numerous researches in developmental psychology. The familial support, referring to the parental affection and guidance, is related to many positive effects (Harter, 1993; Wolchik et al, 1989). Almost all researches about support have been studied using the observation of the parent-child interactions (Tardy, 1985), or in the evaluation of the received support (Barrera and Ainly, 1983). However, not many have investigated those giving support, allowing a better understanding of their representations of support, the situations where they perceive it necessary, the frequency and the type of support preferred.

The objective of this exploratory study has been to identify the parental representations of the child's support needs and the nature and frequency of the support that the parents perceive to have given.

About thirty parents of children aged from six to nine years old, whom ten of these children have behavior problems, responded to two questionnaires and a semi-structured interview. Test z, test t and analysis of variance (ANOVA) have been used to analyse these data.

The parents reported to have given support to their child in a similar proportion. However, the parents of the children without behavior problems perceive significantly more the child's need of emotional support during difficult situations with peers or at home. The mother and father are also perceived more often as the source of support.

This study will be continued by using a larger sample of parents, controlling the sex, age and socioeconomic status.

Introduction

For the past few decades, lots of interest has been shown for the notion of support with particular attention to its importance in people's social adaptation, mental health and resistance to stressful event (Andresen & Telleen, 1992; Bö, 1994; Cohen & Syme, 1985; Cotterell, 1992; Gottlieb, 1981; Holloway & Machida, 1991; Holloway & Machida, 1992; Sarason & Sarason, 1985).

The support given to the child - firstly given through parents' behaviors such as approving, helping and encouraging - has a great influence on the child's

development, through the assurance of their acceptation and approval as a person (Thomas, Weigert & Rooney, 1974). Familial support is related to the parental affection and guidance (Bogat, Caldwell, Rogosh & Kriegler, 1985; Garmezy, 1983; Werner & Smith, 1982). It is also identified as a protective factor in many studies: familial support reduces stress effects on children living in a low socioeconomic context (Sandler, 1980) or going through divorce (Amato, 1993; Sandler, Miller, Short & Wolchik, 1989). It plays a role in children's cognitive development (Rollins & Thomas, 1979), such as in the linguistic development of young children or in the teenagers' conceptual level. It also has an influence in the academic adaptation (Cauce, Hannan & Sargeant, 1992; Dubow & Tisak, 1989) and personal adaptation (Drapeau & Bouchard, 1993). This goes to show that support is playing a crucial role (Bryant, 1985) that many researches in child psychology underline.

In a study of 285 children aged from 8 to 16 years old who have lived through a stressful event, such as death of a parent or a divorce, Wolchik, Beals & Sandler (1989) found less depression and behavior problems in a group of children who are satisfied with their family support than in the control group. In another study on children starting their first grade at school, Cauce & Gonzales (in Cauce, Reid, Landesman & Gonzales, 1990) note the link between parental support, self-esteem and children's adaptation. Other positive effects are also found by Blyth & Traeger (1988) and Harter (1993). The support of at least one parent would be a protective factor, even in low socioeconomic context (Rutter, 1979; 1983). Also, a greater parental support would facilitate the child's socio-affective adaptation (Wolchik, Beals & Sandler 1989). Furthermore, some adaptation problems found in a group of adolescents aged from 13 to 18 years old have been related to the lack of parental emotional support (Offer, Ostrov & Howard 1981). Barrera & Garrison-Jones (1992) found, in the same way, more depressive symptoms from a group of depressed adolescents aged from 12 to 17 years old who perceived to have less parental support.

What can motivate a parent to offer or not offer some support to his (her) child? There are very few and limited answers to this question, since there is very little data about the significance that the support has for the person who's giving the support (Gottlieb, 1981). Nevertheless, the positive effects of support for the child is better known. Still, the development of social-cognitive psychology emphasizes the importance of the representations, as Goodnow (1988) writes: "To focus on parents' overt behaviors is to treat parents as unthinking creatures, ignoring the fact that they interpret events, with these interpretations probably influencing their actions and feelings." (p.287).

Adults, and particularly parents, have different ideas about child development (Rubin & Mills, 1992). In this domain, a wide field of study has been developed by researches such as those from Dix & Grusec (1983), about maternal representations of their child's misconduct, Miller (1988), about parental beliefs related to cognitive development, Parke (1978) and Maccoby & Martin (1983), studying the parental ideas about their interactions with their infant. Among all the studies in this field, Schaeffer (1987), for example, found that the academic competence of 5-year-old children can be predicted by maternal ideas and behaviors measured when the children were 1-year-old.

However, support was not studied in these researches and not in function of parental representations. These representations can differ, as shown in different studies, such as when the representations are related to child behavior (with or without behavior problems). Rubin & Mills (1992) found that the absence of maternal reactions following a maladjusted behavior of their child was partly the consequence of the maternal belief that the maladjustment was caused by some temperamental factors. The way parents interact with their children is related to their own perception or image of the child (Stern & Hildebrandt, 1986). If they assume that the child is able to understand the reasons behind different actions and to moderately control his (her) behavior, the parents are more resistant in fulfilling the irrational demands of the child (Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

The lack of research about the parental representations of the children's needs of support underlines the importance of exploring the parental beliefs related to support.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this exploratory study is to identify firstly the parental representations of children's needs of support, secondly the nature and the frequency of the support that the parents believe to have given to their child during the last month, and finally, the differences between the representations of parents having a child without behavior problems, and the representations of parents having a child with behavior problems.

Method

Subjects

Twenty-seven parents and their first cycle primary school child (mean age = 7,6 years of age) were recruited on a voluntary basis. Ten of these parents have a

child with severe behavior problems, as determined by the school. All the children in this study are from schools attended by a middle-class socioeconomic population.

Instruments

- Children's needs of support questionnaire. Ten situations, previously identified as problematic by primary school children, are related to academic problems (1 item), peer relations (3 items), relations with adults (3 items), and child's internal processes (emotions, feelings; 3 items) (Salomon, 1995; Salomon & Strobel, 1997). These situations are presented to the parents. For each situation, three types of information are collected:

1. The parental perception of the child's need of support (yes/no answer)
2. If yes, who the child should ask for support (mother, father, teacher, school headmaster, etc.)
3. The type of support the parent thinks the child needs (as defined by Reid, Landesman, Treder & Jaccard, 1989): a) emotional support (e.g., someone who's listening to me), b) instrumental support (e.g., someone who helps concretely to do the work), c) informational support (e.g., someone who can explain things to me) and d) companionship (e.g., someone who's spending time with me).

The internal consistency of the instrument is .77.

- Supportive behaviors questionnaire. For this study, this instrument has been adapted from its original version (Barrera, Sandler & Ramsay, 1981; Barrera & Ainlay, 1983). Forty items ("Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors") has been developed to measure on a five-point scale (1=never, 5=almost everyday) the frequency of the supportive behaviors given by someone during the last month. These supportive behaviors are referring to the giving of information about how to do something, comforting by expressing affection, suggesting what to do, etc. All items are presented affirmatively (e.g., "I let him (her) know that he (she) did something well"). Furthermore, Barrera & Ainlay (1983), Stokes & Wilson (1984) have identified four factors describing the type of supportive behaviors: emotional support, tangible assistance, cognitive information, and guidance. The internal consistency of the original version of the instrument and of the instrument translated in french is over .90.

Finally, the parent was invited to describe some personal situations in which they perceived their child's needs of support. In this voice-to-voice interview, seven open-ended questions were asked to the parent.

Procedure

Parents were invited to participate by a letter given at primary school to their 1st, 2nd or 3rd grade child. The anonymity of the study was mentioned. Following an affirmative answer, the parent received the two questionnaires by mail, with the request of sending them back in a pre-paid envelope. After this, the 10 minutes interview was made over the telephone.

Results

Concerning the children's needs of support (as reported in table 1), all parents (of children with or without behavior problems) agree with the necessity to give support to their child if facing a problematic situation. However, parents of children without behavior problems perceive significantly more than parents of children with behavior problems the need of support in the case where their child is very sad ($Z= 2,19$, ($< .05$). A few other statistically significant differences related to the type of support and its possible source are listed in tables 2 and 3.

Referring to emotional support (listen and comfort), parents of children without behavior problems encourage significantly this type of support in four situations (table 2): problematic peer relations (situations 3 and 4), difficult situations at home for the child (situation 7) and need to tell someone his/her problems (situation 8). However, parents of children with behavior problems favor more the informational support (advising, giving explanations). But both group of parents are significantly different only in the situation of when the teacher has a lack of interest for the child (situation 2).

In general, parents perceive that they should be the main source of support for their child. This perception is especially found in the group of parents of children without behavior problems (table 3). The significant differences are related to three problematic situations: lack of interest of the teacher for the child, fights with other children and the child's sadness. The parents of children with behavior problems perceive the headmaster, the teacher, the psychologist or even in some cases, the brother or sister, as a greater source of support for their child.

Concerning the parental representations of the support given to their child during the last month, no significant difference is found on the global scale (table 4), neither for the type of support on this same scale. All parents estimate to have given support to their child from an average of once to twice a month to once a week. However, for three items when computed separately, parents of children with behavior problems score significantly different, as they perceive to have given more

support to their child by guiding them and giving them more information about how to do things.

The results from the *interview* corroborate the tendency of the parents of children without behavior problems to favor emotional support, in opposition to parents of children with behavior problems who prefer the informational and instrumental support (e.g., help the child to do a task, help the child to control his/her behavior). Lastly, 53% of parents of children without behavior problems as opposed to 20% of parents of children with behavior problems talk about listening to the child and giving them affective support, whereas 40% of parents of children with behavior problems as opposed to 12% of parents of children without behavior problems perceive that they give tools, feed, help to wash, and finally guide their child.

Discussion

All parents have an idea about their 6 to 9 years old child's needs of support (1st to 3rd grade at school). Assessing the problematic situations, all agree with the necessity to give support to the child if they need to talk about their problems. Other priorities between problematic situations seem to differ depending if the parent has a child with behavior problems or not. These results can refer to Goodnow's (1988) point of view about the different ways parents interpret the everyday life events and how these interpretations probably influence their actions and feelings. In the group of parents of children without behavior problems, the first situations mentioned as the ones where the child needs support are when there are difficult situations at home for the child or when the child has academic problems. In the group of parents of children with behavior problems, the first situations mentioned are when the child has conflict with adults or peers. The difference between the two groups is significant for the situation referring to the child's sadness. Only half of the parents of children with behavior problems recognize the child's needs of support in this last situation, compared to almost all parents of children without behavior problems. Depending on the situation, when support is favored, emotional, informational and instrumental support are the most considered. What makes a parent favor one type of support to another? Not many answers are available, but many factors must intervene, such as the characteristics of the situation, of the child, the parent, their personal background, their way to resolve problems and the parental *beliefs* about the child's behaviors (Dix & Grusec, 1983; Rubin & Mills, 1992). Emotional support is significantly more often mentioned by the parents of children without behavior problems, and although the differences aren't always significant, parents of children with behavior problems seem to favor the informational and instrumental support. These results are also

confirmed with the answers of the parents of children with behavior problems about their representations of the support that they believe to have given during the last month and their answers during the interview.

The parents of children with behavior problems see themselves less as being the one who could give support, especially if there is a lack of interest of the teacher for the child, fights with other children or if the child is very sad (this last situation was perceived as less important in the matter of needs of support). These results raise a question on the role that the parents perceive to be able to fulfill. Why count on the headmaster, the teacher or the psychologist, who can be an authority figure, but at other times, count on the brother or sister to be supportive? The sample of this exploratory study is too small to allow any answers and conclusions. Nevertheless, the interest to look at the support from the parental point of view is clearly demonstrated in this study, as well as the importance of the support in child development (as mentioned in many studies, such as Amato, 1993; Bryant, 1985; Cauce, Hannan & Sargeant, 1992; Drapeau & Bouchard, 1993; Harter, 1993; Rutter, 1979; 1983). The few indications underlined in this study give many new directions, such as considering conducting this study with a wider sample and considering other variables such as the child and parent's gender, the socioeconomic status and the age of the children. These variables might play a role on the nature and frequency of the support and the parental representations of children's needs of support.

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Results

Table 1
Children's needs of support in problematic situations as reported by the parents

Problematic Situations	Parents Gr.A[1] N=17 (%)		Parents Gr.B[2] N=10 (%)		Z
1. Academic problems	16	94.12	8	80.00	1.13
2. Lack of interest of the teacher for the child	13	76.47	8	80.00	-0.21
3. Lack of interest of other children for the child	14	82.35	7	70.00	0.75
4. Fights with other children	13	76.47	9	90.00	-0.87
5. Children's jeering of the child	11	64.71	8	80.00	-0.84
6. Conflicts with adults	14	82.35	9	90.00	-0.54
7. Difficult situations at home for the child	16	94.12	8	80.00	1.13
8. Child's need to tell someone his (her) problems	17	100.00	9	90.00	1.33
9. Child's boredom	13	76.47	8	80.00	-0.21
10. Child's sadness	15	88.24	5	50.00	2.19*

1. Parents of children without behavior problems
2. Parents of children with behavior problems
* $p<.05$

Table 2

Type of support chosen by the parents[x]

Problematic Situations	Emotional support			Information Support		
	Parents Gr.A[1] N=17 (%)	Parents Gr.B[2] N=10 (%)	Z	Parents Gr.A[1] N=17 (%)	Parents Gr.B[2] N=10 (%)	Z
2. Lack of interest of the teacher for the child	—	—	—	1 5.88	4 40.00	2.20**
3. Lack of interest of other children for the child	10 58.82	0 0.00	3.06***	—	—	—
4. Fights with other children	8 47.06	1 10.00	1.97*	—	—	—
7. Difficult situations at home for the child	11 64.71	2 20.00	2.25**	—	—	—
8. Child's need to tall someone his/her problems	13 76.47	4 40.00	1.97*	—	—	—

x. Only statistically significant results are presented here

2. Parents of children without behavior problems

3. Parents of children with behavior problems

* p<.05

** p<.02

*** p<.003

Table 3

Source of support as reported by the parents : the parents[x]

Problematic Situations	Parents Gr.A[1] N=17 (%)		Parents Gr.B[2] N=10 (%)		Z
2. Lack of interest of the teacher for the child	13	76.47	3	30.00	2.37**
4. Fights with other children	8	47.06	1	10.00	1.97*
10. Child's sadness	13	76.47	3	30.00	2.37**

x. Only statistically significant results are presented here
1. Parents of children without behavior problems
2. Parents of children with behavior problems
* p<.05
** p<.01

Table 4
Parental support given to the child

Items	Parents Gr.A[1]		Parents Gr.B[2]		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F (1.25)
Global Scale (Barrera)	2.92	0.17	3.18	0.47	2.39
I assisted him (her) in setting a goal for himself (herself)	2.65	1.22	3.90	1.20	6.72*
I taught him (her) how to do something	3.53	0.94	4.30	0.48	5.72*
I checked back with him (her) to see if he (she) followed the advice he (she) was given	2.35	1.06	3.50	1.08	7.30*

1. Parents of children without behavior problems
2. Parents of children with behavior problems
* p<.02